



“Waiting” (Photo: Pinterest, Milton Gantt)

If there was one thing on which he prided himself, it was keeping to the railroad’s timetable. To Chapman, if his train was scheduled to arrive in Willoughby at 8:37 p.m. on Saturday—the *only* day of the week the northbound train from The Big City stopped in this jerkwater town—then, by God, it was his sacred duty to ensure the train arrived at *exactly* 8:37 p.m. . . . not a minute early, not a minute late. And yet, here they were, at Willoughby, four minutes behind schedule and counting. This wasn’t good. Time was of the essence.

Waiting

Theodore Jerome Cohen

Conductor Delmore Chapman watched apprehensively as the idling steam engine on Track 1 in front of him huffed menacingly like a caged animal, its stack belching huge plumes of thick black smoke.

“What’s the problem now?” he shouted to engineer Eddy Wadham, a burly, soot-covered man who was dwarfed by the engine’s four 72-inch drive wheels as he worked on a connecting rod.

“It’s the goddamn bearing again,” he shouted. “Jesus, just once I’d like to take this consist up the Main Line without having to lube it at every other stop. You’d think the shop would’ve fixed the wedges and replaced the adjustment screws by now, but oh no, you have to tell them ten times before anything gets done!”

Wadham continued lubricating the faulty bearing while Chapman, staring at his Ball pocket watch, clenched his teeth. They already were four minutes behind schedule, one of which resulted from the engine’s drive wheels having lost traction on the wet, leaf-covered tracks just outside Westport an hour earlier.

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To Marshall Prestor, however, time meant little. He was in no hurry. After all, he'd been coming to the station to meet the 8:37 every Saturday night for the past 20 years, year in and year out, in rain, sleet, and snow. Waiting patiently. Standing under the station clock in his neatly pressed World War I uniform. Looking up and down the platform. Hoping to catch sight of Sophia Montaine, the love of his life.

They had met while attending high school in Willoughby, and, were it not for the War to End All Wars, would have married August 13, 1917, a week after the United States entered WWI. It was not to be.

Driven by patriotism, Marshall had enlisted in the Army. Following basic infantry training, he returned home briefly to say his goodbyes to family and friends . . . and to Sophia. In the bandstand near the lake on the Friday night before his departure, dressed in his khaki cotton uniform with light blue piping, russet brown boots, and a campaign hat, he spoke in hushed tones of what had been . . . and of what would be when he returned. Most of all, he spoke of his undying love while Sophia could barely utter a word through her tears. The thought of losing him was more than she could bear.

If they were to have a life together in Willoughby, they both knew it would have to wait until the war was over.

Then, he was gone. As part of the American Expeditionary Forces, Marshall and his fellow soldiers bolstered the "unbroken" French and British forces who had suffered four years of a bloody stalemate across the entire Western Front.

Though Sophia wrote daily, few of her letters made it to the front. For his part, Marshall barely had time to sleep and eat, much less find time to gather and pen his personal thoughts. He treasured remembrances of her writings—that she had left Willoughby, for example, to teach in The Big City—and took solace in knowing she had gotten on with her life and had found joy in working with the youngest children in the city's public-school system. Her words of joy never ceased to buoy his flagging spirits during sleep—fitful sleep punctuated by the constant cannonades from the Huns' artillery. But most of all it was her promise to meet him at the train station in Willoughby when he returned that drove him on. "Never forget," she wrote endearingly, "I will be there for you when you return home . . . and forever after."

But in the fog of war, anything even resembling a life with Sophia in Willoughby after the guns went silent was but a blur in Marshall's mind, something to be viewed through a lens so broken and soaked in the lifeblood of men sacrificed upon the altar of freedom that their identities, much less their humanity, were often distorted beyond recognition. In the end, the Battle of the Argonne Forest was so catastrophic that Marshall's division suffered devastating casualties, with thousands of America's bravest left to be buried in the Meuse-Argonne American Military Cemetery. Alas, Master Sergeant Marshall Prestor, 53rd Infantry Brigade, 27th Division, US Army, listed as Missing in Action, is not among them.

Sophia never did return to Willoughby. Her closest friends will tell you she was heartbroken on losing her beloved Marshall and vowed never to return to where they had met.

To this day, however, the people of Willoughby swear that if the light of the Moon is just right, and if you happen to be on the platform at the train station in Willoughby on a Saturday night, you may just catch a glimpse of a soldier in a khaki cotton uniform, russet brown boots, and a campaign hat standing under the station clock, waiting—patiently—for the 8:37 from The Big City.